

BWW Dance Review: Lydia Johnson Dance

by [Barnett Serchuk](#) Jun. 14, 2018

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Have you ever gone out at the last minute rushing to an event you really know nothing about, not caring about how you look: Do my socks match? is my hair combed? Did I already wear these pants?

Need I go on?

That's very much how I felt on the evening of June 7, 2018, when I went to see a performance of Lydia Johnson Dance at the Ailey Citigroup Theater. I had no expectations whatsoever; I had never seen any work of hers before. I had a minute or two to look at the program. My interest piqued when I saw Deborah Wingert's name listed as Ballet Mistress. Deborah Wingert? I remember her from the New York City Ballet with affection, but I didn't expect to see her with this group. And Stephen Hanna, previously of New York City Ballet, as a guest artist?

Huh?

I'll get right to the point: I was so impressed with the evening that I stopped taking notes, allowing me to focus exclusively on the dance. Which doesn't help my review since my thoughts seem a total hodgepodge when I try to read them now, so I hope Ms. Johnson, her company, and readers will excuse me. It was so rare to be taken with images, music; by the end, I really walked out into the warm air and just thought about what I had seen. And I kept walking for a long time.

What did I think about? How is it that not too many people have taken notice of Ms. Johnson's work before? No commissions by ballet or modern dance companies? Are there no talent scouts out there?

Maybe I count as one.

The few reviews I have read about Ms. Johnson's work have praised her musicality, her ability to fuse ballet and modern dance. Yet, there is always a question: perhaps she is not going too far; she's too nice, not demanding enough. While I can buy some of it, the end result is so much more. Its subtlety, its musicality, its ability to tell a story through dance without conjuring one up (that's left up to you), puts her choreography near the top of what I have seen recently. In fact, now I'd like to see her entire oeuvre.

I have a feeling that Ms. Johnson has a great deal to offer besides good taste. She has great talent, but not always the venue to present her choreography. And funds, no doubt.

Which we've all heard about before.

So wonderful choreographers we should hear about more often are left somewhere in the twilight zone, swinging between choreography and teaching, making a living even if this living is not always a passport to future fulfillment.

The four dances on the program, *What Counts*, *This*, and *my heart beside...*, *Trio Sonatas*, and *Undercurrent*, show Ms. Johnson's ability to Integrate modern dance and ballet so that they seem just like everyday extensions of each other. This is not as easy to produce as it seems. How often have we seen ballet dancers take on modern dance, only to seem sloppy and unhinged as they move? I don't know where Ms. Johnson studied ballet, but wherever it was and whoever taught her laid the groundwork for her great understanding of how two such stylistic differences could be brought together and yield up a very entertaining and meaningful evening.

All the dancers were outstanding: Laura Di Orio, Chazz Fenner-McBride, Peter Cheng, Ramona Kelley, MinSeon Kim, Katie Martin-Lohiya, Daniel Pigliavento, Dona Wiley, Nicole Nerup, Michelle Siegel, and Shekinah Thompson-Gbolagunte
I look forward to more.

Photograph: Travis Mgee.